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Dazi Socializing to Digital Group Identity: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Sports Fandom

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Abstract. The Development of digital platforms has changed how young people make friends by sharing interests online. Dazi socialisation in China is a relatively loose form of interaction with low commitment and activity-oriented relationships. However, repeated interaction and digital participation may lead to the formation of stronger groups based on these temporary connections. Based on Social Identity Theory, this paper studies how shared interests, frequent interaction and the structure of digital platforms promote the formation of a collective identity and potential group polarisation. Wang Chuqin's Chinese fan community can be modelled on the international rivalry between Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo to examine the effects of different community structures on group cohesion and identity boundaries. Fan organisation is likely to promote organised participation and stronger group identity; on the other hand, geographically dispersed communities can maintain fan identities while also belonging to other social groups. However, both environments can produce in-group/out-group conflict due to strong group consciousness. Building on the concept of dazi socialisation, this paper examines the possible development path from temporary companionship to more stable forms of digital belonging. It also provides a direction for the future empirical study of platform structure, social identity and online polarisation.

Keywords: Dazi socializing, Social Identity Theory, digital communities, sports fandom, group polarization

1. Introduction

With the development of the Internet and mobile social platforms in recent years, people's lives and social relationships have been changing. Generation Z has grown up with the development of digital technology, and many people believe that they are "digital natives" who live, play, and express themselves in a digital world [1]. In China, this change has led to the development of more relaxed and informal forms of socialisation for young people, such as casual and light gatherings [1]. Therefore, "dazi" socialisation has become a typical type of interaction among young people today. Originally linked to companionship in certain activities, the scope of relationships between dazi has expanded to cover dining, travel, exercise, games and fan activities. Rather than forming long-term relationships, people are more likely to choose a date for a specific social or activity reason.

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Dazi relationships are generally less committed, have weaker emotional bonds, and are more unstable than friendships based on long-term emotional connections. Most previous studies have regarded Dazi relationships as a type of weak tie, where interaction is limited to a particular activity and may cease naturally upon the completion of the activity or social need [1]. Such a relationship will also keep the involved parties separate and reduce the need for extensive disclosure of personal information; thus, it may be more appealing to young people seeking a company without intimacy [2]. From this perspective, the socialising activity of dazi is mainly functional and situational; people can form relationships that need to be maintained or are no longer required.

However, some interest-based communities on the digital platform appear to have formed an extended-tie system. Continuous communication, shared activities and repeated exposure to online content can lead to the formation of more stable groups based on a shared identity. Previous studies have shown that circle-based socialisation among Chinese Gen Zers is often organised based on shared interests, values and lifestyles, and through these groups, individuals develop distinct group cultures, behavioural norms and a sense of belonging [3]. It may be that dazi socialisation is transitioning into interest-based communities. First, people are seeking a partner for a specific activity, but repeated interaction and shared consumption of content can lead to identification with a larger group and the formation of an "us" versus "them" division. This phenomenon is especially prominent in sports and fan communities; although shared interests increase the cohesion of the group, they may also foster competition, exclusion and intergroup conflict.

Existing research has studied the digital social life of Generation Z, dating apps, and interest-based communities. However, fewer studies have explored the development of relatively stable forms of group belonging and exclusivity from temporary and low-commitment Dazi relationships. Previous research has focused on the flexibility, low commitment, and interpersonal boundaries of dazi relationships, and the potential transformation of these boundaries through repeated digital interaction has not been adequately studied. Differences in the structure of the platform, content dissemination, and community organisation may also limit the scope of these relationships to united or exclusive social groups.

Based on the reasons above, Social Identity Theory is employed to believe that Dazi socialisation is a result of shared interests, repeated interactions and a digital platform environment. Compare the digital communities of different cultures to explore how common interests and frequent interactions, as well as platform structure and group boundaries, contribute to the formation of a collective identity. Determine whether similar interest-based activities result in different degrees of community cohesion and exclusivity in the digital and cultural environments. In this way, this study aims to expand the current understanding of dazi socialisation and explore how initially temporary and low-commitment relationships can gradually develop into more stable forms of social belonging in the digital space.

2. Contextualisation and theoretical foundation

2.1. Development and basic features of dazi socializing

Dazi socialising has changed along with other changes in the social life of young people in the digital age. With the spread of digital platforms in recent years, people's lives and social circles have changed; now, most social interactions take place online. Instead, people can easily find others with similar interests, hobbies or other temporary social needs. As a result, various flexible forms of socialisation have emerged for Generation Z, such as casual gatherings, interest-based groups and activity-oriented friendships [1]. Therefore, Dazi socializing can be viewed as an extension of the

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general change in society from relationship-oriented to situation- and interest-oriented forms of interaction.

Originally, "dazi" was a partner in a card game in the Shanghai dialect, but now it generally refers to someone who goes out with others to participate in a certain social activity. Relationships between dazi can occur in all kinds of situations, such as dining, travelling, exercising, gaming, studying, and attending cultural or entertainment events. Its first feature is that the connection is generally based on a particular joint activity rather than a broad relationship among people. Relationships were previously regarded as weak ties in the earlier studies due to their lack of strong emotion and relatively low interaction costs [4]. The above relationships can provide people with a sense of companionship and social support without the responsibility of close friendship.

Thus, relatively healthy Dazi socialisation is not the same as intensive forms of circle-based interaction. The relationship with Dazi is relatively free, and participation is voluntary and activity-based. People can enter or leave a relationship at any time due to changes in their circumstances; it does not necessarily mean they are unhappy. Exercise-based DAZI relations are a representative case. People can meet regularly to play running, badminton or table tennis because they are interested in these sports, but they also have other social lives outside the sports. It is precisely because it is not closely associated with the other person or any other group that it remains useful.

Repeatedly interacting with them will also lead to changes in their behaviour. When people communicate often, share information, consume the same content and participate in various activities together, their relationship may start to change after the initial activity. At this time, the interaction of Dazi may evolve into interest-based communities where members share cultural symbols, behavioural norms, values, and a stronger sense of belonging [4]. The Change is not necessarily negative. A Strong Social Network can provide emotional support and increase participation in the community. A possible problem is that the group identification is based on exclusion.

The polarisation of Dazi communities can be examined at three connected levels. Many interactions among the people lead to the sharing of interests and a sense of "we are the same"; regular communication and the acceptance of common norms further strengthen the cohesion of the community and set up an implicit boundary for outsiders. At the platform level, recommendation algorithms can increase users' interest in and consumption of similar content by repeatedly showing them this content and forming a highly interactive community. The above mechanisms may result in a situation of increased division within the original open-interest community and reduced willingness to listen to other opinions.

Therefore, the development from Dazi's interaction to polarised circles is not inevitable. A similar interest group can be organised flexibly and inclusively in one place, but it may be very close-knit or exclusive in another. Understanding this variation requires paying attention to both the features of the relationship itself and the influence of individual identity, community structure, and the digital platform environment.

2.2. Social identity and group polarization

According to Social Identity Theory, even a weak and short-term social relationship can lead to a stronger sense of group identification over time [5]. Tajfel and Turner believe that people obtain some of their sense of self by belonging to social groups. Through processes of social categorisation, social identification and social comparison, people differentiate between groups and give a positive evaluation to the group they belong to [6]. Many ways of interaction, shared symbols and repeated exposure to group-related materials can also be used in the digital world.

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Social identity theory can help explain how the activity-based relationship for Dazi socializing gradually deviates from its original functional purpose. At first, only the activities they took part in were common knowledge among people, such as table tennis and supporting certain athletes. With more frequent interaction, however, the shared activity can also serve as a foundation for group identity. The participants begin to feel that they are not only individuals engaged in the same activity but also members of a particular social group. This will help the organisation maintain internal cohesion and promote the formation of a culture of cooperation.

Group polarisation occurs when there is a strong identification and many interactions among a small number of people [7]. In a highly cohesive community, the members are more susceptible to the opinions of others in the group, are more likely to view external criticism as a threat to the group's identity, and develop a strong sense of "in-group" and "out-group". Digital Platforms can further promote this by increasing the exposure and spread of similar content. Therefore, the same reasons that motivate people to join the Dazi socialisation, such as shared interests, frequent contact and a sense of belonging, can also result in exclusion and intergroup conflict if the boundaries of the group are too rigid.

3. Digital platforms and cross-cultural cases

3.1. Digital platforms and the transformation of dazi communities

Digital platforms have been used to convert the connections of acquaintances into a more enduring community of shared interests. In offline settings, Dazi relationships are generally limited to the particular activity that brings people together. The spread and scope of communication through digital platforms have increased. Users can keep exchanging information and commenting on the content, and maintain relationships even after they are no longer involved in the original event [8].

A recommendation system can continuously show users content that they will be interested in based on their past behaviour. Repeated exposure promotes the formation of shared knowledge, language, symbols and norms in communities. At the same time, users are not passive recipients of the algorithms' recommendations. Research on Chinese fandoms has shown that fans are actively developing strategies to increase the popularity of their favourite celebrities through coordinated participation and content dissemination. Thus, repeated interaction raises the profile of the community, and increased exposure prompts more people to join and be recognised.

3.2. The Chinese case: Wang Chuqin and the transformation of sports fandom

The fandom of Chinese table tennis player Wang Chuqin is a typical case of interest-based relationships forming an organised digital community. First, fans are connected by their shared interest in table tennis and the athlete. They participate in competitions, share information, talk about the performance, etc. At this time, their interactions are mainly based on shared interests, and social relationships are formed through common interests.

With repeated interaction, however, the athlete can become the centre of a larger community for development. Fans create and spread content, engage in group activities, and form a system of communication. Research on Chinese digital fandom shows that fans can organise online activities and interact with platform algorithms strategically to increase the popularity of their favourite idols [9]. Although this study focuses on entertainment fandom, it can offer some reference points for learning about the development of organised participation in sports fandom.

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A powerful group identity will also result in the differentiation of members from outsiders. In January 2025, Wang Chuqin's fan club announced the dissolution of its Weibo fan group due to the widespread problem of excessive fan-circle behaviour among Chinese athletes [10]. The development shows that problems may arise in the form of organisation of fan groups for individual support. Over time, the participation will gradually give rise to shared expectations and a sense of belonging among the people.

For the purpose of social identity, this case may be the result of group membership rather than shared interests. Fans first gather to support the same athlete, and through continuous interaction and joint activities, they may develop a strong sense of belonging to a group. With the development of the sense of group consciousness, some conflicts among fans over athletes, rankings, and rival fan bases are now regarded as threats to the group's identity rather than simple differences in sports interests. However, the available evidence does not indicate that all fans of Wang Chuqin have experienced such changes. Sports fandom, in turn, can offer a setting for the development of shared interests into more organised forms of digital social participation.

3.3. The international case: Messi, Ronaldo and global fan communities

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are good examples of interest-based digital communities around the world that have emerged on social media. Both athletes have built large-scale overseas fan bases and, through them, have been able to disseminate information and cultivate a sense of belonging among fans around the world [11].

The competition is due to people with the same interest in sports. Fans have developed statistics, awards, performances and memes to support their favourite players. Such content can promote a sense of community and increase division among the rival factions.

However, the structure of the Messi-Ronaldo rivalry is not as centralised as some of the Chinese fan communities. Fans of the band are all over the world and speak different languages. A supporter may be very fond of a particular player and also join other sports, culture, or national communities. Fan identity can be considerable without having to be the person's main social identity [11, 12].

Not that to say the world of international fans is divided. Although they are well-known, some fans are still reluctant to support the other side because they believe that criticizing their favourite player will damage the image of their own group. However, due to the spread out and relatively decentralized nature of these communities, identities can be more fluid.

3.4. Cross-cultural differences in community formation

Wang Chuqin's fan club and the Messi-Ronaldo rivalry are similar in that they have both been created in the digital age and are relatively cohesive and exclusive. Concentrated platforms and organised fan groups in China can enhance the sense of community and identity. On the other hand, the world-wide scattered fan groups for Messi and Ronaldo can use various platforms to express themselves freely. The reasons for this may be due to culture, platform construction, forms of interaction and community organisation. Frequent communication will extend the spread of groups, and a weak network is more flexible with identity.

4. Discussion

Therefore, it should not be assumed that Dazi socialising is either good or bad. The social impact of frequent interaction, group identification and the structure of digital platforms vary. Dazi

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relationships can offer convenient companionship and reduce the social costs of forming relationships by connecting people with similar interests. Therefore, the two are relatively flexible and have a low commitment for young people today.

However, after repeated interaction within a certain community, the shared interests may gradually turn into a strong sense of group identity. The Platform's Recommendation Function and Group Participation will further empower the people. Therefore, polarisation may be due to different interests as well as a strong sense of in-group identification and reinforcement of group boundaries, and limited contact with outsiders.

Therefore, in addition to addressing harmful content, platform governance should also consider how to change the structure of interactions that promote excessive group isolation and conflict. At the same time, the attempts to regulate online communities should not reduce the positive social functions of interest-based interaction. Therefore, the future development of Dazi socialisation should aim to maintain its openness and flexibility while reducing excessive boundary formation and intergroup hostility.

5. Conclusion

This study explores how dazi style social interactions—initially short-term relationships based on shared interests—evolve into more stable forms of collective identity within digital environments. Through an analysis of cases involving both domestic and international contexts, the study identifies parallels between the fan base of Chinese athlete Wang Chuqin and the global rivalries surrounding Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. While fan communities typically form around shared interests, internal fragmentation can also occur. Highly centralized fan organizations often facilitate organized participatory activities, whereas geographically dispersed communities may foster the coexistence of fan identities with other social identities.

However, as this study relies primarily on conceptual analysis and two illustrative cases rather than systematic empirical data, its conclusions offer plausible explanations rather than establishing definitive causal relationships. Future research could employ methods such as interviews, surveys, and longitudinal social media tracking to examine the evolution of collective identities over time, as well as how platform algorithms, community structures, and cultural contexts influence social inclusion and fragmentation. Such research would deepen our understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of "da-zi" style social interactions for young people.

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